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# How philanthropy can help stop the invisibilization of Indigenous migrants in the U.S.

By Odilia Romero and Xiomara Corpeño

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Indigenous migrants have been neglected and made invisible by prevailing attitudes and practices in the U.S., including philanthropy. Grantmakers can do something about it.

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The deaths of 5 Indigenous children since December 2018 while in Border Patrol custody were not an accident, nor were they merely a consequence of the Trump administration's ruthless attacks against migrants of color. They are a current manifestation of the systemic erasure of Native people in the U.S. that began during the country's founding and continues to today.

The culture of philanthropy has adopted the practice of invisibilization of Indigenous communities. Funders often overlook community models that do not adhere to western governance structures or strategies. The problem only deepens when it comes to resourcing Indigenous migrant organizations.

As the death of these children weigh heavy on all of our humanity, now is the

time for grantmakers to begin challenging the dominant ideas regarding the identities of Indigenous migrants, their existing customary laws, their worldview as well as their cultural and linguistic needs.

## ONGOING INVISIBILIZATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN THE U.S.

The U.S. was founded on the systematic genocide of Native people. The original text of the Declaration of Independence dehumanized them as "merciless Indian Savages" and the citizenship of Native Americans was recognized less than 100 years ago.

Invisibilization stealthily never acknowledges the existence of Native people in real-time. Calling this a "nation of immigrants" upholds the "pull



Indigenous women strawberry pickers. Photo by Antonio Nava.



A Zapotec dancer in downtown Los Angeles. Photo by Antonio Nava.

ourselves up by our bootstraps” American exceptionalism and ignores the atrocious treatment that Native people have and continue to endure.

U.S. government officials simply do not acknowledge the existence of Indigenous migrants – all migrants from Latin America are classified as “Hispanic.” There are very few academic studies on Indigenous people who migrate north to the U.S. because they technically don’t exist according to government statistics.

The Indigenous Farmworker Study is one of the few comprehensive studies that focuses solely on Indigenous people born in Mexico who work in California – the highest-ranking agricultural producer in the country. The study found that many migrants come from the Oaxaca, Guerrero and Chiapas regions. According to the report, at least 30% of farmworkers are Indigenous, making them a significant population in the production of our nation’s food source.

Mexican migrants in California speak at least 30 Indigenous languages; many Indigenous migrants within California speak neither English nor Spanish. Parents cannot communicate with their children’s schools. Medical visits can be

frustrating for both patients and providers. Interactions with police officers can land a person in jail or deported. Lack of access to interpretative services can result in life or death situations.

Indigenous migrants do not come to the U.S. simply to escape poverty or chase the American dream as many believe. Families and individuals are forced off their lands<sup>1</sup> as a result of neoliberal policies and the U.S. war on drugs with the “primary victims [being] poor, migrant, Indigenous and peasant farmers.”<sup>2</sup> Multinational corporations buy out or steal land from Indigenous communities with the support of government officials. Mining companies, industrial farms and other manufacturers regularly use violence to assert their dominance, with murder or torture being commonplace. Pollution from these industries produce catastrophic environmental effects, forcing immediate as well as surrounding communities to flee.

Currently, immigration courts across the country have seen a steady rise in speakers of Indigenous Guatemalan languages in the last 5 years, according to the Justice Department’s Executive Office for Immigration Review, which

oversees the courts. And they are only the most recent additions to the list, which for several years has routinely included Zapotec, Mixtec, Ixil and Popti, languages from southern Mexico and Central America. According to *The New York Times*,<sup>3</sup> U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials encounter the following languages: K’iche’, Achi, Ixil, Awakatek, Jakalteq and Q’anjobal. There are no comprehensive Indigenous language interpretation providers in the U.S. Lawyers and community organizations rely upon untrained community members, including children, to interpret sensitive and complex information.

Indigenous people are often reluctant to disclose that they don’t speak Spanish for fear of being disrespected and denigrated. Even when it becomes obvious that the person is Indigenous, non-Indigenous lawyers, community advocates and interpreters assume that the client has enough Spanish “to get by,” jeopardizing the person’s rights.

For those living in the U.S., hospitals, government institutions and social service agencies use 3rd-party language service providers who do not understand the diversity of Indigenous languages and dialects, which vary from community to community; the language group from 1 town may sound completely different than the language group in another. These for-profit agencies have little to no oversight, and they are contracted by immigration courts to provide interpretation of a language they do not speak nor understand.

#### ACKNOWLEDGING THE IMPLICIT RACISM IN MOST LATINX COMMUNITIES

There is a strong, vibrant pro-migrant movement in the U.S., led mostly by Latinx migrants from largely Mexican and Central American countries. But in these regions, there is a distinct approach to the invisibilization of Indigenous people: promoting the myth of *mestisaje*, the

“mixed race” ideology that the people of Latin America assimilated to a mostly European/Spanish culture.

Many Latinx migrants adopt the mestizo identity at varying degrees and are unaware of their implicit bias against Indigenous people from their home countries. Even those who are running organizations that serve migrant communities from Latin America oftentimes perpetuate the notion that Indigenous people are illiterate, dumb and unwilling to speak up. They question the intelligence of Indigenous people who don’t speak Spanish.

In other words, challenges faced by Indigenous migrants are not on the radar of most Latinx communities due to internalized racism and systemic erasure from their consciousness.

### INVISIBILIZATION OF INDIGENOUS MIGRANTS IN PHILANTHROPY

U.S. foundations have largely ignored Indigenous communities as well. Grantmakers tend to hesitate supporting emerging or “fringe” issues. There is an assumption that the actual Native population is “insignificant” in terms of impact outcomes.

Worse still, funders assume that Indigenous-led organizations are nascent without a proven track record of results, ignoring the cultural protocols and systems of Indigenous communities. Funders expect a board of directors and governance structures, and those structures do not necessarily reflect how Indigenous communities organize themselves.

In the current crisis we see at the border, much of the philanthropic funding goes toward crisis management, and supports legal frameworks that ultimately exclude, refuse to serve and evade poor and disenfranchised migrants. Migrants who do not have the proper interpreter during an intake continue to get overlooked. This problem is reinforced by immigration, asylum and refugee laws that were established to barricade entry of non-whites into the U.S.

Edgar Villanueva’s breakthrough book, *Decolonizing Wealth*,<sup>4</sup> provides an excellent philanthropic framework that challenges organizations to reconsider standing idly by as Indigenous communities are continually forced off their ancestral lands, which results in abuse and even death as they seek refuge in the U.S.

What’s happening at the border is part and parcel of 528 years of colonization, which continues today. Despite dominant narratives of the Americas, Indigenous people are not dead nor have they disappeared. They survived and continue to thrive, create and innovate.

Through hometown associations (HTAs), Indigenous communities have created centralized and effective collectives to meet the needs of their people that transcend the concept of borders. These organizations are complex, with volunteer board members elected by their respective communities. HTAs self-finance cultural programs and cultural events that pass Indigenous language, gastronomy and cultural practices to younger genera-

tions. These networks are also used to help individuals and families, referring community members to job opportunities and awarding scholarships to undocumented Indigenous youth.

Nonprofit organizations led by and for Indigenous migrants have also developed in recent years, with a vision of social justice and full integration of human rights for Indigenous communities. They advocate for worker and language rights despite the lack of financial resources from the government and philanthropy.

Imagine what a fully resourced Indigenous migrant movement in the U.S. can do for the freedom and liberation for all Indigenous people in the world. Imagine what it would look like if they have full funding for programs and staff.

### 3 THINGS THAT PHILANTHROPY CAN DO NOW

Grantmakers can do more right now to start addressing the invisibilization of Indigenous migrants such as:

#### 1. Fund Indigenous-led migrant organizations.

Indigenous communities have complex and effective collective structures that are culturally and linguistically relevant, but there is no funding to run programs. Often, leaders have a day job and go unpaid while they do amazing work to help their communities. Do deep homework when you are in the process of identifying nascent Indigenous-led migrant organizations. There is a tendency for funders to rely on tried-and-true organizations such as those that may have already received grants from national grantmakers or their leaders have received numerous awards.

#### 2. Build the capacity of Indigenous-led groups.

Organizations need capacity-building support in order to build infrastructure and develop more Indigenous leaders. Additionally, they need technical support

There is an assumption that the actual Native population is “insignificant” in terms of impact outcomes.

to integrate into the predominantly Western frameworks in philanthropy while also promoting and respecting Indigenous community needs and views. Fund core operating support to allow these organizations the flexibility to continue to grow and strengthen its infrastructure and capabilities (e.g. paid staff, underwrite meeting costs, technology, etc.)

### 3. Fund interpretation language justice initiatives for and by Indigenous people.

Many philanthropic institutions don't fund services aside from legal services or strategies. These strategies leave behind Indigenous people who do not speak Spanish, let alone English, simply because their voices go unheard. Many interpreters often work a separate day job and provide interpretation services when they are available. This creates a need to develop formal networks of Indigenous language interpreters who are trained to

interpret complex legal and medical terminologies and to be advocates for their communities. Value the centrality of language as a social justice concern and provide funding to ensure interpretation and translation services are accessible. ■

*Odilia Romero is an Indigenous Zapotec leader who has organized Indigenous communities from Oaxaca for over 25 years. She is the 1st woman to be elected General Binational Coordinator of the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB). A trilingual interpreter in Zapotec, Spanish and English, she developed a training program for Indigenous-language interpreters and recently founded Comunidades Indigenas en Liderazgo (CIELO). Lear more at mycielo.org.*

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*building to migrant leaders both in Mexico and the U.S. who work with the most vulnerable migrant populations such as Indigenous and LGBTQI migrants.*

## Notes

1. For example: Cecilia Niezen, "Farmers struggle for land in Guatemala," Oxfam, August 22, 2013, <https://www.oxfam-america.org/explore/stories/farmers-struggle-for-land-in-guatemala/>.
2. Dawn Paley, *Drug War Capitalism* (Oakland, California: AK Press, November 2014), <https://www.akpress.org/drug-war-capitalism.html>.
3. Jennifer Medina, "Anyone Speak K'iche' or Mam? Immigration Courts Overwhelmed by Indigenous Languages," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/19/us/translators-border-wall-immigration.html>.
4. Visit <https://www.decolonizingwealth.com/>.

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